

The Numismatic Chronicle 176 Offprint

The Maille Blanche of Willem Miles

by

JOS BENDERS

LONDON
THE ROYAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETY
2016

The Maille Blanche of Willem Miles

JOS BENDERS

Plated maille blanche in the name of Willem Miles

IN MAY 2009 a number of specimens of the following maille blanche were offered on eBay.¹

Obv. Short cross.

Outer circle + n[OMEN.]DOMINI.SIT.[BENED]ICTVM

Inner circle + WILLELM:MILES

Rev. Chatel tournois, legend around: +TVRONVSCIVIS

Outer circle: 12 lilies each within two arcs

(23 mm)



Fig. 1. Maille blanche of Willem Miles (Benders collection)

In response to an email enquiry the eBay vendor answered that he had bought just over 50 pieces of this maille blanche. He claimed to have acquired them from a farmer who had found a hoard in Michery, close to Sens and roughly between Paris and Troyes. The hoard allegedly consisted entirely of mailles blanches of Willem Miles. The vendor did not know whether or not the hoard contained more coins than the ones he had bought. He sold them as ‘gros tournois’. The error is understandable, given that the maille blanche looks similar to the gros tournois but has a smaller diameter (23 mm).

The maille blanche was introduced on 10 January 1296.² This date gives a terminus post quem for the hoard and the imitative maille blanche by Willem Miles.

On January 14, 2011, a metallurgic study was conducted using a REM-EDX microscope on three specimens of the Michery hoard by Jan d’Haen (Hasselt University, Institute for Materials Research) and Raf Van Laere in the presence of the author. A drawback of this method is that normally only a thin layer on the surface

¹ I am indebted to Aimé Haeck, Jan d’Haen (Hasselt University), Willem van den Nieuwenhof, Marcus Phillips, Peter Spufford, Susan Tyler-Smith and Raf Van Laere for their assistance in writing this paper.

² J. Duplessy, *Les Monnaies Françaises Royales de Hugues Capet à Louis XVI (987–1793) I (Hugues Capet à Louis XII)* (Paris-Maastricht, 1988), p. 90, no. 215.

of a coin can be studied. Medieval silver coins were often ‘blanched’: copper and other metals were subtracted from the surface, so that the coins looked ‘white’ and appeared to contain more silver than they really did. An analysis of the surface is thus likely to give a higher percentage of silver than the coin actually contains. One of the three specimens, however, was holed, making it possible to study this coin’s interior rather than only its surface.

None of the coins contained a trace of silver. Their cores were made of copper. These were coated with tin (Sn), possibly by two different procedures.

Presumably, when new, the tin surfaces looked sufficiently similar to silver ones for the coins to be accepted as payment. That the coins have actually been accepted is proven by the hoard of Michery itself: the location is in France but the spelling of ‘Willem’ indicates that the coins originated in the Low Countries. If their actual metallic content had been identified at the source, the mailles would probably not have made their way to France. In addition, the fact that they were concealed suggests that they were considered either as being real or at least good enough to deceive others.

The three coins analysed, and a fourth one from a private collection, appear to be die-identical. There is, of course, a proviso in that the poor state of preservation of three of these four coins does not allow a precise comparison. Nevertheless, given the close similarities it seems safe to suggest that these coins were all produced from a limited number of dies, possibly just one pair. It appears that they stayed together after minting and rarely if ever changed hands after being produced. A possible scenario is that a French mercenary who had fought in the Low Countries was paid with these coins, and that he concealed them when returning or having returned home. An argument fitting this possibility is that, to my knowledge, imitations of the maille blanche are only known from regions in France (Aquitaine, Brittany and Burgundy) but not from the Low Countries.³

Two Half Eagle Gros in the name of Willem Miles

In 2004 two other coins of Willem Miles were published. Van den Nieuwenhof⁴ published an imitative ‘half eagle gros’, a type which was introduced in or shortly after 1269 by the Countess of Flanders, Margaret of Constantinople (1244–80), at her mint at Aalst. It was continued by her son Guy of Dampierre (1280–1305) and imitated by at least ten rulers in the Low Countries. The date of these imitations ranges between 1285 and 1330.⁵

³ J.N. Roberts, *The Silver Coins of Medieval France (476–1610 AD)* (South Salem, 1996), pp. 296–7.

⁴ W. van den Nieuwenhof, ‘Willem Miles’, *De Beeldenaar* 28 (2004), pp. 77–82.

⁵ J.R. De Mey, *Répertoire des imitations des types monétaires Belges au moyen-âge; Première partie: Brabant Flandre Tournai* (Brussels, 1988), pp. 77–81.



Fig. 2. Eagle gros of Willem Miles (private collection)

Obv. Short cross.

Outer circle \dagger **NOMEN DOMINI [...]**BENEDICTVM

Inner circle \dagger **WILL-EM:MILES**

Rev. Double-headed eagle in quatrilobe.

\dagger [.]**MO**[.....]**COMITIS**

(23–24 mm)

The Belgian hoard of Halle 2003, concealed in 1305 at the latest, contained another half eagle gros in the name of Willem Miles. Its legends differ from those on the coin published by Van den Nieuwenhof.⁶



*Fig. 3. Eagle gros of Willem Miles ex Halle 2003 hoard
(private collection) 1.65 grams (23.3 mm)*

Obv. Short cross

Outer circle \dagger **NO**[.]**ENDOMI**[.....]**TV**M

Inner circle \dagger **WILLEL**[.]**MILES**

Rev. Double-headed eagle in quadilobe.

[.]**MONETA**:[..]**DE**:P[...]**II**[...]

Unfortunately, the location of the mint is not legible. Finally, it must be noted that Haeck et al. read ‘**VA**’ in front of ‘**DE**’ on the reverse.

Haeck and Van den Nieuwenhof have kindly made pictures available to enable one to compare the three different types. Two peculiar similarities between the maille and both eagle gros suggest that the dies were made by the same person. In the first place, there is the awkward spelling of the name Willem on the maille and the eagle gros from the Halle hoard. On both coins, it reads ‘**WILLELM**’. The L before the M does not occur in Dutch, and appears to have been derived of the Latin ‘Guilhelmus’. Secondly, the maille and the other eagle gros have an almost identical crescent shaped contraction mark apostrophe after the **M** of Willem.

⁶ A. Haeck with L. Beeckmans and F. De Buyser, ‘Een depotvondst met onbekende XIIIde en XIVde eeuwse munten te Halle (Vlaams-Brabant)’, *RBN* 150 (2004) 135–56 at p. 154, no. 6.

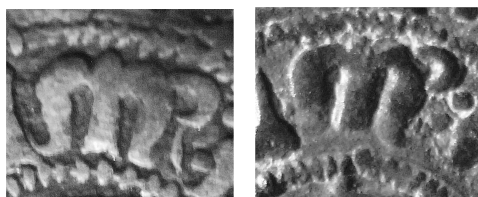


Fig. 4. The contraction mark after the **M** on the maille (left) and the eagle gros found in Halle (right).

Who was 'Willem Miles'?

The identity of the issuer Willem Miles remains a mystery. The title 'miles' (knight) rather than an indication of the capacity of Willem's rule, for instance 'comes' (count) or 'dominus' (lord), is highly unconventional. Van den Nieuwenhof made several suggestions: William of Horn (1264–1300–1301);⁷ Bishop William of Utrecht (1296–1301); William of Dendermonde, the second son of the count of Flanders, Guy of Dampierre; William of Avesnes, later count of Hainaut and Holland (1304–37), William of Pietersheim (1296–1319), and William of Jülich (d.1304), a grandson of Guy of Dampierre. He opted for the latter. Haeck *et al.*, however, argued that William of Avesnes is the more likely candidate. He was regent in Holland from the summer of 1303 until he became count in September 1304, and may have minted during this period. In short, at least six candidates have been suggested out of whom William of Jülich and William of Avesnes were the two favourites.

The absence of any silver in the mailles blanches shows these to be plated forgeries and suggests that they are not the produce of an official mint. If this is correct, Willem Miles is as fictitious as the silver content of his mailles. In other words: the presumed mint issuer Willem Miles may very well never have existed.

Having made this statement, a qualifier applies. It is possible that the eagle gros were indeed minted for a real Willem Miles, whose name was later 'borrowed' by the coin forger who produced the mailles blanches. This forger may have been productive, as the similarity between the maille and the eagle gros (Figure 3) suggests.

Metal analysis

The results of the metal analysis are decisive for the question whether or not the investigated coin was merely debased or a plain forgery. This issue is particularly relevant for the region and period under study, the southern Low Countries around 1300. To finance his wars with England and Flanders, the French king Philip IV (1285–1314) embarked on a policy of fiscal debasement, 'earning' him the title 'roi faux-monnaieur'. This led to further debasements in the Low Countries, as Mayhew has shown for the imitations of Edwardian pennies in, among others, Brabant, Cambrai, Flanders, Hainaut, Herstal and Liège.⁸ In addition, Haeck and his

⁷ See E. Haanen, 'Bijdragen aan de muntgeschiedenis van de heerlijkheid en het graafschap Horn (1270–1567)', *JMP* 101 (2014) pp. 58–123 at p. 65 for an updated chronology of the Lords of Horn.

⁸ N.J. Mayhew, *Sterling Imitations of the Edwardian Type* (RNS SP 14) (London, 1983), pp. 33–5, 41, 47, 55, 58–62 and 146–8,

colleagues were suspicious about several coins in the Halle hoard, arguing that they might be contemporary forgeries rather than coins issued in the name of somebody with actual minting rights. Furthermore, to the current day it is contested whether or not a gros tournois struck in Dendermonde is an official issue, as Martiny recently argued,⁹ or plated forgeries, as Phillips classified them.¹⁰ The evidence shows that this period of political strife and debasement gave rise to both heavily debased coins and forgeries. Metal analyses can help to determine what option holds true for the coins just described.

⁹ J.-C. Martiny, *De eerste grote zilveren munten in Vlaanderen 1269–1322* (Gent, 2016), pp. 122 and 138–41 (illustrating the 19 specimens of a hoard found in Leuven).

¹⁰ M. Phillips, 'The early use and imitation of the gros tournois in the Low Countries', *RBN* 160 (2014), pp. 95–132 at pp. 128–9.

